

We don't want you: the very selective Israeli army

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Hanit Magid arrived at the Israeli army's induction center in late December, 1994, and traded in her civvies for olive drab. A soft-spoken, athletic 18-year-old with long dark hair, Magid hopes to become a physical fitness trainer. Like other Israelis, Magid grew up expecting compulsory military service. But the term "compulsory" is ironic in her case: a year ago her local draft center told her she was medically exempt. As a premature infant, she'd had a tube surgically inserted to drain excess fluid from her skull, and army rules forbid drafting anyone with a foreign object in his or her body.

For Magid, the Israeli version of a 4F was no gift. She filed her appeal; her childhood doctors called the press; a national newspaper spread her story over two full pages. At a medical board hearing, she found dozens of other men and women, people begging to be drafted. Some were on their sixth appeal. Magid was luckier: the medical officers agreed on the spot to let her in.

The story underlines the Israeli army's growing manpower problem: it has too much. From the country's first day, a small population and big defense needs demanded total mobilization, with all Jews eligible for conscription. According to Reuven Gal, formerly the army's chief psychologist and currently director of the Israeli Institute for Military Studies, Israel once drafted more than 90 percent of its eligible men, more than any other country in this century; only wartime North Vietnam came close. Most women have also been called up. Today, while the military is still hungry for combat-fit recruits, the universal draft is providing too many men and women for support tasks.

The simple solution would be to hand out exemptions. But in Israel, the idea of selective service is regarded as an attack on sacred values, and on the poor and uneducated--the people most likely to be exempted. Debate is growing over conscription policy and the army denies what its own figures reveal: that it is gradually becoming more discriminating.

The surplus is the price of several successes. The first success was population growth, always an Israeli goal. The children of a mid-'70s baby boom are now draft age. Planeloads of immigrants from the former Soviet Union have boosted the population by 10 percent in five years, adding more recruits.

Meanwhile, the military has gone high tech. In Israel's early years, notes Hebrew University historian Martin van Creveld, it faced an arms embargo, leaving it "long on manpower and short on technology." Today it has the smartest arms the United States and local r&d can provide, and the army needs what one politician recently called, with some spite, "courageous technicians." So the brightest and most fit recruits undergo long training. Others are not only unneeded as grunts, but cost money that could be used for weapons.

Then there's peace. To be sure, the fifteen-year-old accord with Egypt didn't eliminate the chance of war, Israel will have to keep up its guard after what is expected to be a "cold peace" with Syria, and force reductions based on the emerging Palestinian peace are years away. Still, the treaty with Egypt clearly reduced the danger of a war on all fronts, and eliminated the logistics burden of holding the Sinai Peninsula, larger than all of Israel. Israel has now signed an agreement with Jordan that is expected to produce a "warm peace." Even if a treaty with Syria doesn't explicitly call for troop cuts, it could produce the result indirectly. Israel, says Joseph Alpher,

director of Tel Aviv University's Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies, "envisages compensating for the territory and high ground of the Golan with high-tech means." That would be expensive, and every new expenditure increases pressure to cut personnel.

The bottom line, Jaffee Center reports show, is that Israel's regular forces have remained virtually the same size since the mid-'80s. Manpower needs are expected to fall gradually, and in the long term peace could reduce the need for combat troops. A military source says that "as a policy, being more selective isn't under discussion." But army figures show that 17.5 percent of eligible men are now exempted from service. Another 15 percent are discharged early--meaning one-third of Israeli men don't serve a full three years. For women, who are barred from combat, compulsory service has been sliced from two years to twenty-one months. Men who complete regular service remain in the reserves until they're 50. But, among reservists, selective service has become a fact, with combat soldiers called up for long periods every year, while most others do little time.

Yet the myth of a people's army is woven into Israeli life. Bearing arms is part of the Zionist code; soldiers are bused to Jerusalem's Yad Vashem Holocaust Museum as part of their military education. The army is expected not only to defend the country, but to supply a shared experience erasing the lines between rich and poor, native and immigrant. Van Creveld has written that with "the seclusion from civilian society, the strange dress and haircuts, the hazing, the instruction in the country's lore, the element of bloodshed," army service has been a significant rite of initiation.

The military is also an avenue for social mobility, a way for poor children with brains and determination to get ahead. Combat units are assigned recruits who have scored highly on intelligence, aptitude and motivation tests, and all officers come up through the ranks. "When I come and say I'm a reserve officer in the paratroops, it opens doors," says Addis Aklum, 29, who arrived in Israel from Ethiopia when he was 14, without his parents. Aklum was the first Ethiopian to enter the highly respected paratroops, and the first to win lieutenant's bars. In the late '80s, he says, as many as two-thirds of young Ethiopians reached combat units, many becoming commissioned and non-commissioned officers. "The army seemed like a place where you could advance on the basis of your ability," he says. Often, though, kids from the wrong towns and neighborhoods end up as cooks, mechanics or other support troops, and some land exemptions as undereducated, or undermotivated. Recently, more young Ethiopians have taken those routes, and Aklum says that if the army becomes choosier, "the Ethiopians will be the first to suffer."

It's the better-off young people who are most likely to make the crack units. To improve their chances, some teens sign up for pre-army courses. In the southern town of Eilat, for instance, the nonprofit Challenge Center runs an evening course for twelfth-graders that includes training in the desert, orienteering and marching while carrying comrades on stretchers. Graduates finish up with two weeks of climbing in the Italian and French Alps. "The army is compulsory," says Oliver Neuwirth, who runs the course. "People say, 'As long as I have to do it, I might as well do it the best I can.'"

Military service, however essential, also has a price, and not just in physical casualties. "There are young people who are left with scars," stresses Reuven Gal, "either because of combat, or simply because of being in the army, with its demands." Training for fighting units is grueling. As a recently discharged soldier describes it, "They want to push you to the edge of breaking down and make you function there. We never had enough time to eat, or to sleep, or to piss.... Then they'd punish us for falling asleep in a class.... In maneuvers, we'd fall asleep standing up, and one commander used to kick guys in the chest to wake them up." Those who can't bear the military and are released early bear a stigma afterward.

Yet virtually no one publicly supports issuing more exemptions. "Without a doubt," says Moshe Nativ, a

deep-voiced reserve general and former chief of the army's Manpower Branch, "selective service would be convenient from a purely military perspective." Nativ opposes the idea, however, and neither he nor anyone familiar with the military can name one general who backs it. Among politicians, opposition is intense. Labor Party Knesset member Ra'anan Cohen articulates the mood, saying, "Most of those rejected will be the disadvantaged, who will only become more alienated."

An obvious option would be to take everyone, but for less time. That, however, would mean early discharges for combat troops as well. But combat troops are still needed, and they don't become fully trained until the final months of service. Making up for conscripts with already overburdened reservists would be a politician's nightmare.

The military could balance a shortfall of conscripts in fighting units by signing up more volunteers as career soldiers. But career soldiers get paid well; conscripts are cheap. Worse, there's no guarantee that the smart and success-bound will sign up for extra time; they're eager to conquer the universities.

Some argue for civilian national service: anyone the military doesn't need would be given other work. But the desire to serve has come from the obvious need to defend one's country. Forestry work isn't likely to fit the bill.

A year ago an army-appointed commission gave the government a secret report on the manpower glut. Recommendations reportedly included sending conscripts to police duty and reducing the period of service for male soldiers. Neither move, it appears, will solve the problem. Gradually, with no general or government wanting to say so aloud, more Israelis will get the news that so angered Hanit Magid: that they need not report. "I don't think the army can turn away someone who wants to serve and contribute," Magid told me just before her call-up. But it can, and it probably will.

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